Shakespeare and Media Ecology: Beyond Historicism and Presentism

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Abstract

This article proposes media ecology – a combination of media studies and performance studies with literary and cultural history – as a research perspective for Shakespeare studies. In contrast to a hermeneutics of renewal – as evinced both in the New Historicism and in what has been called Presentism –, which tries to turn Shakespeare into "our contemporary" (Jan Kott), media ecology combines a sense of historical alterity with an awareness of the continuing transformations of 'Shakespeare' in changing media settings: from manuscripts and printed texts to theatrical performances, music, opera, cinema, and televised media events. Moving beyond the currently dominant strands of Renaissance studies (the historicist and the presentist bias), this article challenges scholarly ideas of historicity (as opposed to timelessness, universality or contemporaneity) on the one hand and concepts of presentism (as opposed to historic specificity or singularity) on the other hand. How, if at all, can we reconcile the urge to make Shakespeare contemporary (and, by extension, keep his work relevant) and the conflicting desire for a historically accurate interpretation?

As an example, the article focuses on the masque in *The Tempest,* which poses obvious difficulties for a hermeneutics of renewal and is often cut from performance or adapted beyond recognition. Later productions and adaptations frequently extend the spectacular qualities of the masque to *The Tempest* as a whole and ignore the skepticism about theatrical illusion that is voiced by Prospero in the play. In the case of *The Tempest*, cultural productions, ranging from dramatic performances to the closing ceremony of the London Olympics of 2012, are difficult to conceptualize in the framework of adaptation studies (which relies on the precedence of an original over its derivations). I argue that media ecology can help scholars to map out such connections and differences between performances and cultural phenomena relating to Shakespeare as cannot be fully grasped either in a historicist or presentist perspective.

Keywords: Shakespeare, media, *The Tempest*, masque, spectacle, London 2012

After the performance of the masque in act 4, scene 1 of *The Tempest,* Prospero admonishes his future son-in-law Ferdinand not to be too impressed by the illusory effects of theater: "[...] These our actors, / As I foretold you, were all spirits and / Are melted into air, into thin air" (4.1.148-50, Shakespeare 2011: 275-76). His subsequent words about the "baseless fabric of this vision" and "this insubstantial pageant" (4.1.151, 4.1.155) have been read not only as references to the masque in *The Tempest* but also as a metacritical commentary on the "inadequacy of theatrical spectacles", displaying its creator's awareness of "the limitations of theatrical pretense" (Kernan 1995: 167). And yet, despite its limitations, this "baseless fabric" has given rise to a long history of adaptations in various media over the past four hundred years, ranging from opera (such as Johann Rudolph Zumsteeg's *Die Geisterinsel,* 1797 and Thomas Adès's *The Tempest,* 2004) to film (most notably by Derek Jarman, Peter Greenaway, and Julie Taymor) and multi-media spectaculars (see Vaughan/Vaughan 2011: 73-124, 149-160). Shakespeare thus exemplifies a form of art that does not so much reflect specific historical (or social or psychological) conditions, but rather a broader range of media appeal, which makes his plays more easily adaptable to changing forms of historical media arrangements.

While some critics might see the limitations of theatrical illusion, as stated by Prospero, as further evidence for Shakespeare as a "literary dramatist" writing for the page as well as for the stage (Erne 2003, Cheney 2008), others regard theatrical performance as the *sine qua non* of Shakespeare's drama (e.g. Weimann/Bruster 2008). To understand early modern dramatic texts as blueprints for stage performances does not preclude other possibilities (such as investigating the texts' circulation in the early modern book trade; Erne 2013). But scholars interested in performance and adaptation tend to focus more on continuities between past and present performances, whereas textual scholars tend to have a historicist bias, emphasizing the difference between the present and the past. The debate, therefore, is not so much between textualists and performance-oriented scholars than between predominantly historicist and predominantly 'presentist' approaches to Shakespeare.

Following Ewan Fernie's definition, presentism in literary studies is "a strategy of interpreting texts in relation to current affairs," in contrast to the (New) Historicist approach that "emphasizes historical difference" (Fernie 2005: 169). This contrast seems to raise the question whether Shakespeareans are forced to decide between two mutually exclusive options: interpreting Shakespeare either historically *or* in relation to the present. But, I would argue, this contrast is too simplistic. To ignore the historical context of origin appears to me as short-sighted as making it the exclusive focus of attention. But is there a third option, one

that emphasizes continuities and interprets Shakespeare *both* historically *and* in relation to the present? That is, can we read the Bard's oeuvre as belonging to the early modern period and at the same time consider it in its current relevance, since the present continually revisits and restages the plays in different forms and different media?[1] In the latter case, Shakespeare may still be what Jan Kott famously called him: "our contemporary" (Kott 1964 [1974]). Certainly, distance and closeness between Shakespeare and the modern world can both be exaggerated, and scholarly attempts to confine Shakespeare to his own historical moment can be as reductive and constricting as the opposite trend of a presentist "current affairs" Shakespeare, or a Shakespeare who is dissolved into nothing but media refashionings primarily concerned with whatever social, political, and aesthetic interests happen to be on the critic's agenda.[2] Both reading strategies run the risk of reducing Shakespeare to a monolithic, often national phenomenon, either belonging to England as the historical source culture, or aligned with the presentist scholar's target culture. They tend to lose sight of the global portability and adaptability of Shakespeare.

Moreover, New Historicism and Presentism are not as clearly opposed as I have just presented them; Fernie, for example, claims they are "oddly at one" in their views of the past (2005: 173). Perhaps they should be more usefully regarded as two faces of the same coin in that they both strive to bridge the gap between the past and the present, but in different ways. In contrast to 'old' historicism, which is primarily interested in "reconstructing contexts" (Hume 1999), New Historicism and its British counterpart, Cultural Materialism, frequently bring quite modern views to bear on past phenomena, claiming to find in the cultural archive what, in fact, are modern theoretical constructs, for example the social performativity of personhood (as analyzed in Greenblatt 1980), or a Foucauldian dynamics of power and subversion (e.g. Dollimore 1984; for an incisive critique cf. Condren 1994).

While modern interests often shape their research, major proponents of the New Historicism have confessed their yearning for "speaking with the dead" and the "touch of the

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1 I am here not concerned with the debate about periodization and the advantages or disadvantages of naming this period either Renaissance or early modern. On the debate between 'historicizing' and 'contemporizing' Shakespeare, see also Bode and Klooss 2000.

2 On the debate between historicism and presentism in early modern studies, see Wells 2000, Hawkes 2002, Fernie 2005, Grady and Hawkes 2007.

real" (Greenblatt 1988: 1; Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000: 20) – a somewhat nostalgic desire for historical authenticity, for bringing the past into contact with the present. In order to gain access to the lived reality of past worlds, New Historicists rely on the "ethnographic realism" of Clifford Geertz (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000: 28; cf. Geertz 1973). They seek to find in texts, by means of "thick description" (23), "those traces that [seem] to be close to actual experience" (30). But one need only invoke the metahistory of Hayden White to point out that such approximations to history as 'what actually happened' in Leopold von Ranke's sense can hardly be objective but are subject to "emplotment" (White 1978: 83). As the story of the past gets written, its narrative shape is at least co-determined by the interests of the present. The most relevant accusation leveled at the New Historicism is that it imaginatively constructs (i.e., invents) more than it historically reconstructs in terms of context out of the available documentary evidence, and that its way of doing so is often elegant but sometimes historically inaccurate (Hume 1999, *passim*). Its selections of texts and contexts, like those of Presentism, often appear politically motivated, and its desire to 'touch the real' tends to make a similar fetish of immediacy.

What is at stake here is an understanding of the temporality of history that admits, on the one hand, that the past is inaccessible and non-repeatable: a "singularity" in the sense of radical alterity (cf. Attridge 2004); and, on the other hand, that the past nevertheless can still be made present, re-presented by a reshuffling of elements for the purposes of later periods and moments in the sense of Blumenberg's (1985) definition of historical temporality. Importantly, Blumenberg emphasizes functional differences between recurring motifs in cultural history, such as Petrarch's use of Augustine in his account of climbing Mont Ventoux (Petrarca 1995), rather than seeing their similarity as transhistorical. For literary studies in particular, Blumenberg's "mechanism of reshuffling describes not only the ways in which conceptual systems rework old arguments, but also how successive literary works reconfigure ancient motifs" (De Bruyn 2012: 80).[3] In the case of works of art, or literary texts – in particular when these texts were written to be performed –, later performances and adaptations *rework* and *reconfigure* old material in new ways using different (historical) media configurations and combinations. Even though they preserve many traces of the original, these reworkings are never fully identical to it (cf. Orgel 2002). New media

[3] Blumenberg's work in the philosophy of history was a formative influence on the Constance School of reader-response criticism (Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss); see De Bruyn 2012: 45-94 for a survey of that influence. My understanding of Shakespearean *Wirkungsgeschichte* owes a debt to this tradition, but also to cultural memory studies as inaugurated in Germany by Jan and Aleida Assmann; see, for instance, Erll/Nünning 2008.

configurations add new layers of meaning to texts from the past by inserting them into new contexts; this is why media history should be an integral part of cultural and literary history, and also receive more attention in Shakespeare studies. I propose the term *media ecology* for a combination of media and performance studies with literary and cultural history as a means to explore such transformations as the reshuffling of Shakespeare in various media from the late 16th century to the present. Following usage established in media studies since the early 1970s (Postman 1973), the term 'ecology' in this context denotes the networked, interlocking structure of different media and media configurations: by focusing on the connections between these configurations of manuscripts, printed texts, theater, music, cinema, TV, and digital media, media ecology makes it possible to grasp the presence of Shakespeare even in remote contexts beyond the reach of more traditional concepts of adaptation, such as globally televised media events like the London Olympics.

My case study, the masque in *The Tempest,* intends to illustrate the capacity of media ecology to study both the (inevitable) constant remaking of Shakespeare in 'our' own image (see Taylor 1991) and the moments of resistance to such reinventions. The masque in act four of *The Tempest* exemplifies such a moment of resistance to modern reinvention: it contains a residue of strangeness, of alterity that resists assimilation to modern agendas and interests. Because the masque is a genre, a type of performance, that no longer exists, it cannot be incorporated or easily transposed into modern productions of the play. This resistance in texts and other artifacts from the past should not be neglected or ignored. By moving beyond New Historicism and Presentism towards a media-ecological perspective that does not lose sight of either continuities or differences, studies of Shakespeare are not obliged to replace history with elusive notions of presence or to postulate a timeless aesthetic sphere outside history. Rather, such a perspective enables us to combine a historical focus on the object with close attention to the changing historical presences (or 'presents') of that object in different media configurations.

In proposing this perspective, I bring together two readily available approaches: (Shakespearean) media studies and performance studies. The first approach focuses on Shakespeare's transhistorical appeal to various media, uniting a historical base with a large number of "baseless" adaptive accretions, additions, and alterations (see, e.g., Taylor 1991, Cartelli/Rowe 2007, Rowe 2010). As part of the dynamics of Shakespearean globalization, these adaptations now constitute a legitimate object of study in their own right (cf. Berensmeyer 2011). The second approach (see, e.g., Weimann/Bruster 2008, Yachnin/Badir 2008, Worthen 2014) begins by acknowledging that the emotional and cognitive responses

elicited by Shakespeare's drama are not merely textual, nor are they achieved only by words or rhetoric, but also by stage performances or, today, by performances on film or other types of visual media. The result is not merely a representation of a given reality beyond the stage, or a record of (to repeat the phrase one last time) "actual [historical] experience," but an experience that belongs to the moment of performance and its reception. This experience thus becomes a part of Shakespearean *Wirkungsgeschichte*, understood as both the history of reception and the history of (changing) effects – a history that is best explored by reference to the media that have shaped this history.

This essay is in four parts: the first briefly introduces recent trends in media ecology; the second relates these trends to developments in Shakespeare studies since the advent of the New Historicism. Part three is an application of media ecology to Shakespeare, especially to *The Tempest* and its cultural afterlife, addressing the question of the relationship between representation and performance in Shakespeare and Shakespearean adaptations. Part four concludes the essay with a reflection on the use of *The Tempest* in the celebrations of the 2012 London Olympics.

1

The term *media ecology* requires some explanation, since both of its constituents can carry multiple meanings. My use of this term derives from cultural anthropology, where it is employed to study human culture against the changing background of media, from speech and writing (orality/literacy) to audiovisual technologies, computers, and the Internet. There is a long tradition of work in media ecology (a term taken from Postman 1973), ranging from Lewis Mumford (*Technics and Civilization,* 1934) and Harold Innis (*Empire and Communications,* 1950) to Marshall McLuhan (*Understanding Media,* 1964) and Walter J. Ong (*Orality and Literacy,* 1982). Despite many differences, most media ecologists share the view that basic human abilities and needs that have evolved over very long periods of time remain more or less stable, while their cultural actualizations change comparatively rapidly, along with the innovations of media technologies.

This shared view led to McLuhan's famous definition of media as "extensions of man" (1998 [1964]: 3). Since then, the traditionally humanist focus of media ecology, as it was expressed in the Toronto and New York schools of media studies (e.g. Ong 1982, Postman 1973), has been questioned and expanded by poststructuralist critics and, more recently, by computer science and science studies, in which media are often attributed with an agency of

their own (see Berensmeyer 2012). McLuhan's own theories already transcend an instrumental view of media as mere tools, but more recent media studies shift the focus on media even further towards non-human agency and the study of media environments. Thus it is not surprising to see the metaphor of the network (with its implications of non-linearity, decentralization, and multiple connections) replacing older ideas of humanity as tool-making animals. Anthropological and ecological perspectives on media have been developing less anthropocentric views of media creation and use, focusing on the co-presence of human and non-human agents in what Matthew Fuller has called "life among media."[4]

Media, in this view, are not limited to mass media as concrete and more or less standardized objects (newspapers, TV, cinema, the Internet, etc.), or "as a sustainable mode of economy and nameable cultural presence" (Fuller 2005: 106); rather, the focus of media ecology is on media configurations as dynamic, evolving and shifting historical processes. Such configurations involve human beings as agents – performers, producers or recipients – in an "actor-network" (cf. Latour 2005). Rather than studying media as objects in the narrower sense of the term 'medium' (e.g. print, TV, film), recent scholars in this field are interested in processes of *medialization*, i.e. the question, as formulated by K. Ludwig Pfeiffer (2008: 15; my translation, IB), "which medial aspects of a so-called medium – and not only those aspects that can be described in terms of form or content – have a tangible impact in the context of dynamic cultural media configurations." Media ecology may thus be defined as a research perspective that investigates the interaction of multiple agencies (objects, processes, persons, and media in the narrow sense) within cultural settings. This perspective hinges on performativity (as opposed to mimetic representation): media do not imitate or replicate something given; they actively shape reality. Media ecology thus necessarily departs from compartmentalized histories of individual media or art forms (literary history, art history, music history, etc.). It proceeds from the assumption that literature and other products of culture depend on or contain more than one single medium (see Pfeiffer 2009 [1988]). For this reason, media anthropologists and media ecologists prefer to speak of sociocultural, technological and psychic processes of *medialization* rather than of media as instruments, objects, or tools – a static view still present in theories of intermediality and multimodality (see Schröter 2011 for a lucid overview). This view of media as always existing in relation to other media (a view that Schröter calls "ontological intermediality", ibid.), and as a network

[4] Fuller 2005: 5; cf. Askew and Wilk 2002, Rothenbuhler and Coman 2005; see also Berensmeyer 2012 for a more detailed discussion of media ecology and its conceptual history.

of processes rather than static objects, poses a cognitive challenge to media theorists because, while human beings are used to perceiving single objects, they are less attuned to 'seeing' the medializing processes that make these objects available to perception.

Applied to Shakespeare, this means, first, that we need to understand early modern theater as a dynamic configuration of several media and, second, that we can regard the texts of Shakespeare's plays as providing a media potential that is open to changing historical and cultural configurations. These two aspects have implications for the way we understand Shakespeare as a historical object (and subject); let us now, therefore, briefly discuss them.

Over the past four decades, the general idea of Shakespeare has changed from that of the solitary genius who "never blotted out line" (Jonson 1954: 583]) to the actor and part owner of a theater company in one of the most competitive and interesting periods in English theater history. Since Shakespeare was deeply involved with the acting company, his situations of writing would have taken many forms for many different occasions: writing and rewriting playscripts, often in collaboration with others; adapting old and new plays for different contexts, e.g. for performances at court or on tour; writing poetry for potential aristocratic patrons, allowing these poems to circulate in manuscript among friends, and possibly seeing them through the printing press. As far as we know, Shakespeare did not care much about seeing his plays printed in a collected edition of reliable, authorized texts. Even though in recent years a strong case has been made for Shakespeare as a "literary dramatist" (Erne 2003, Cheney 2008) who wrote for the page as well as for the stage, the more common opinion is still that Shakespeare "never showed the least bit of interest in being a dramatic author while he lived" (Berger and Lander 2000: 409).

Knowledge of early modern literary culture and "the Shakespearean stage" (Gurr 2009a) has also profited from the work of theater historians, archaeologists, actors and directors who have tried to reconstruct historical performance practices. Parts of the Rose, the Globe and most recently the Curtain theaters have been excavated from 1989 onward. Since 1996, a reconstruction of "Shakespeare's Globe" on the South Bank has been an interesting venue for performance and study (see Carson and Karim-Cooper 2008; and Limon, in this issue). It is one of the best places to study the modern desire for restoring and re-presenting what has been lost, and for providing immediate (physical) access to the past. In fact, the Globe was neither exclusively Shakespeare's, nor was it the Chamberlain's/King's Men's only location for staging plays; at least after 1610, the preferred location appears to have been the smaller indoor playhouse, the Blackfriars, which yielded more profit than the public amphitheater (see Gurr 2009a and 2009b). The reconstructed Globe, despite its practical

merits or degree of authenticity, is thus less a phenomenon of historicism than a symptom of the present popular yearning for authenticity. It may even distort a historicist view of Shakespeare that emphasizes the plays' independence from any particular performance space as a precondition for their global adoption and adaptation.[5] The reconstructed Globe is part of the media history of Shakespeare, not in the sense of a return to the past, but as a site of exploratory theater studies and a medium of modern entertainment. If its historically informed presentation of Shakespeare is fashionable (similar to period performance in classical music), it may also alert us once again to the conundrum of historical distance in combination with persistent remaking and renewal in the present.

2

The conundrum of conflicting (a)temporalizing urges has also been at the heart of the New Historicism. Even though the latter has often been attentive to the performance aspect of Renaissance plays (e.g. Greenblatt 1982, Greenblatt 1988: 1-20), it has focused more specifically on questions of genre than on media issues. It has taught us to see that a vital process of exchange or "negotiation" takes place between what happens in the plays on stage and the "social energy" that "circulates" in the reality around the stage (Greenblatt 1988, beginning with the book's title). This interplay is very important, even though the New Historicism has usually, and unnecessarily, limited its attention to the circulation of *discourse*; only more recently have scholars included the circulation of material objects and other tangible presences in their work. Attention is now being paid to the media conditions of Shakespeare's theater, from the textual constitution of roles in "parts" (Palfrey and Stern 2007) to the particular type of stage used in Shakespeare's time, which allowed close contact and, indeed, offered the prospect of a dialogic or polylogic exchange between players and audience. In the words of Jacalyn Royce (2009: 477), public playhouses provided the actor "with a stage large enough to allow for freedom of movement, yet small enough and close enough to the audience to highlight discrete details of body language" – including, perhaps surprisingly, "small gestures and facial expressions" (Astington 2001: 109). Visual and verbal stimuli made it easy for the audience to become emotionally involved in the action; in anticipation of the cinematic close-up, "the face was expected to be the actor's chief visual medium of communication" (ibid.). Because the stage space was not neatly cordoned off by

[5] On Shakespearean portability, see Berensmeyer 2011.

artificial lighting, soliloquies would be "spoken like asides directly to the visible hearers" (Gurr 2009b: 208).

For a media-historical perspective on Shakespearean drama, this is essential. What Greenblatt calls the "circulation of social energy" (1988) was facilitated by the direct interaction between actors and audience, as well as between audience members, who would also, in contrast to modern theatergoers, remain visible to one another and thus be able to register and process their "collective emotions" (Gurr 2009b: 208). More recently, scholars have also focused on stage props and the cognitive networks established by material objects and their cultural meanings in early modern drama. Mirrors, books, clocks, maps, and letters are material objects that mediate cultural meanings in Renaissance plays (see Sofer 2003, Kinney 2004, Stewart 2008). Shakespeare's plays frequently include or refer to such objects, hence the New Materialism insists on the plays' referential dimensions; but the New Materialism also requires an ecological, networked view of the relationships between objects, texts, and performances in media environments, a perspective that focuses on the interrelations between social and aesthetic energies. According to this view, what happens on stage is not merely an encounter between different discourses (e.g. religious, political, or gender-related discourses) but the emergence of a special kind of space: a space that allows social and aesthetic energies to circulate, but that also allows for moments of mere play or pure performance.[6]

Media ecology, as I propose it here, assumes these relationships to be dynamic: within theater as cultural production, there are medialization processes at work on different levels, ranging from architecture to audience and from playscript to performance. These processes shape, contextualize and decontextualize objects, discourses and practices that circulate both on and around the stage. Thus drama, as one embodiment of the human need for fictions that shape our ideas and desires (cf. Iser 1993), is more than the representation of something given, more than "a simulation of social communication" (Schwanitz 1990: 100; my translation) or even than "the circulation of social energy" (Greenblatt 1988). It is a multilayered process of medializations that connects the actors and sights and sounds on stage with the audience and the world beyond the stage.[7]

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[6] Such moments that exceed reference and representation are quite frequent in early modern drama; a pertinent example from Shakespeare are clown scenes but also scenes of (gender) transformation in the comedies, and many of Falstaff's scenes in *Henry IV*; see Berensmeyer 2013: 90-93 on Falstaff, and Weimann/Bruster 2008 on 'the power of performance' in Shakespeare.

[7] I use the term 'medialization' to suggest that media are better described as dynamic

Costumes provide a good example of this multilayered process of medialization. Here I need to revisit briefly what Greenblatt calls "transmigration," the processes of transfer between social and religious institutions and the theater that can be interpreted as acts of symbolic appropriation, or even, occasionally, symbolic aggression, as when a "sacred sign" such as a bishop's garment is "emptied" and desecrated by being worn on stage (Greenblatt 1988: 112). Costume on stage does not possess the same functions and meanings as costume worn offstage. It can obviously represent (simulate) offstage functions and meanings, but it can also do more. It can expose the theatrical, performative potential of dress in everyday life: the idea that "the clothes make the man." This idea was especially prevalent in Shakespeare's time, when sumptuary laws dictated what people from a certain social rank were allowed or forbidden to wear, and when actors would regularly use the actual clothes noblemen and -women had discarded and presented as gifts to their servants, who were not allowed to wear them but would sell them to the acting companies (see MacIntyre/Epp 1997; McDonald 2001: 231-233). As is well known, companies would spend more money on costumes than they would on new playscripts (see Stallybrass 1996, Jones and Stallybrass 2000). One effect of this theatricalization of dress is that audiences would see actors on stage wearing not a representation of offstage clothing, but the *actual* cloak or hat that a high-ranking statesman might have worn just a short while before, suggesting the performative potential of clothes for "self-fashioning" (cf. Greenblatt 1980). Since dress, medialized as costume, had the potential to blur the line between theater and city life, and between different social ranks, it is no wonder that it added to the existing fears of puritans and city officials who constantly attacked the theater as a site of indecency that endangered civic morality and public health.

But costume can also function as a purely theatrical means of performative transformation. New Historicism and the New Materialism tend to interpret costume in its symbolic function too hastily and superficially as a sign of something else, an institutional or social referent. In other words, there is a tendency to neglect the sheer theatricality of costume. As Peter Hyland argues, studies that focus primarily on the subject of cross-dressing in Shakespeare "minimize the very *theatricality* of disguise" by "look[ing] *through* disguise in search of cultural meanings" (Hyland 2002: 78). This is why Weimann and Bruster (2008: 118) suggest considering "cross-dressing and disguise as a highly performative medium in its

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processes than as static objects, and also to avoid the impression of overly linear transformation processes that is often implied in alternative terms like 'mediatization' or 'mediation' (cf. Hepp 2013, Bolter/Grusin 1999, Siskin/Warner 2010). For a more detailed discussion of the differences and connections between mediatization theory and media ecology, see Clark 2009.

own right," which "conjoins the writings of the dramatist to peculiar, arresting productions of actors' bodies and voices." Costumes and their uses in "the histrionic exuberance of multiple shape-changing" are thus seen to function "as a mixed site for the conjuncture of two media [which] cannot be reduced to the status of representation as an imaginary and ideological form of challenge, struggle, or difference" (ibid.). Disguise, and cross-dressing in particular, function as catalysts for "almost uncontrolled transformation" (138). In performance, costume does not merely simulate social communication, i.e. repeat and endorse the dominant ideologies of its time, but occasionally questions and subverts them and even offers possibilities for mere play without referential meanings or symbolic investments.

The possibility of pure performance is a near-utopian principle in the early modern period; it is realized at those "insubstantial" moments when the demands of representation are transcended by the sheer exuberance of acting. It is these moments, I contend, that make Shakespeare so easily adaptable to entirely different historical and cultural contexts, and they are a crucial blind spot in historicist and materialist readings of Shakespeare, precisely because they "leave not a rack behind" (*Tempest* 4.1.156, 2011: 276). There is hardly any archival material on the basis of which the experience of such moments could be reconstructed. However, the surviving texts of Shakespeare's plays are a crucial site in which the "insubstantial pageant[s]" (ibid. 4.1.155) of early modern drama are given a nameable presence; these texts are the traces of lost performances, and they also materially embody the promise of renewal. They are therefore a basic element of the media configuration of Shakespeare, not merely by providing a textual canon, but also by being a springboard for future readings and performances. Without the textual basis, a reshuffling of tradition would be impossible since there would be nothing to reshuffle. Costume, as I have briefly discussed here, is another important part of this configuration. It is a site of semiotic negotiation between appearance and reality on stage. On the one hand, costume represents the relative fixity of social ascriptions in the early modern period (by means of strict codes of dress); on the other hand, its theatrical use points to the subversion and transcendence of these ascriptions.

The transformative potential of theater, as exemplified by its use of costume, transcends a simple logic of representation; it brings forth something new and unique. The enemies of the early modern stage, such as Stephen Gosson or Philip Stubbes, were quite aware of this potential.[8] For them, it raised the age-old fear of the power of the human

[8] Stephen Gosson penned three assaults on the theatre: *The School of Abuse* (1579), *An*

imagination not only to represent something given but also to transgress conventional boundaries and produce effects of its own. Shakespeare's plays, perhaps more than many others, oscillate between the extremes of mimetic representation and pure play, which no longer preserves an identifiable mimetic core but instead creates a space in which elements of reality can be recombined and transformed into something new. For the dramatist, this oscillation carries the risk of either adhering too strictly to representational constraints or of succumbing to empty modes of mere acting. For the audience, this oscillation makes itself felt as an alternation between involvement and distancing, between being captivated by 'realistic' effects of stage representation on the one hand and becoming aware of *merely* watching a play on the other hand.

Compared with later, more conventional playwrights, Shakespeare is therefore more alert to the fact that the effectiveness of his plays depends on the participation of a very active and imaginative audience, as becomes evident, for example, in the prologue to *Henry V* and in many passages of *The Tempest*. In order to turn the potentials and shortcomings of the media configuration of theater to account, Shakespeare transposes whatever enters his plays into multiple and multifunctional forms: characters, language, actions, generic forms and conventions, historic events, even stage properties (see Sofer 2003). This is in line with what James Calderwood (1971) has called "metadrama": drama as both a form and an anti-form, in which the boundaries between art and life are not abolished but constantly dissolved and precariously reestablished.

Aesthetic illusion is thus at times encouraged and at other times dispelled. Shakespeare has many of his characters say skeptical things about the mimetic weakness of stage representation; but he also actively encourages the audience to work on their "imaginary forces" in order to "[p]iece out" the "imperfections" of stage representation (*Henry V,* Prologue l. 18, 23). Many instances of the play within the play, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* illustrate the limits of representation, especially when the actors are incompetent. Yet there is also a multilayered dramatic irony at work, so that the audience is led to discredit one part or aspect of a play (e.g. the mechanicals' performance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) so as to lend credence to the more fantastic elements in other parts of that play (e.g. the fairy scenes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*).

Apology of the School of Abuse (1579) and *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (1582). Stubbes, a radical puritan, published his anti-theatrical pamphlet *The Anatomy of Abuses* in 1583. Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* (1595) is often read as a partial response to Gosson. See Barish 1981 and now also Ruge 2011.

Moreover, because early modern stages and audience spaces were less clearly separated than they are today, it was arguably easier to involve the audience more directly in the play. Thus Prospero's admonition to Ferdinand in *The Tempest*, with which I opened this essay, can also be read as a comment addressed to the audience on the insubstantiality of dramatic representation more generally. This attempt to connect stage performance to its audience is even more poignantly expressed in Prospero's epilogue begging the audience for their "indulgence" (Epilogue 20, Shakespeare 2011: 308). Paradoxically, the mimetic weakness of theater leaves a space for the audience to take a more active part in the play's concerns and thus to be realize the transformative (and at least potentially subversive) effects of theater on their everyday lives. Perhaps, therefore, the early modern assaults on the stage by Puritans and city officials were quite justified. As a media configuration, early modern theater was highly unstable; but this was an enabling condition of its malleability and plasticity, which made it perfectly suited to express the discrepancy between the official (and rather static) ideology of its time and people's experience of a changing world (cf. Weimann 1988, 171-73). In a philosophical perspective, the early modern stage thus corresponds to the modern worldpicture of the "open context" (cf. Blumenberg 1979): while "hardly ever [...] manifesting the verisimilar reality of represented beings and events" (Braunmuller 1990: 88), while not claiming to represent *the* world, some early modern plays did present models of "alternative worlds" (Mahler 1998: 6).

3

The Tempest is a good example of the dialectics of representation and theatricality outlined above. It repeatedly invokes the magic of theater as an element of impressive, breathtaking performance, while also displaying an awareness that this magic cannot be sustained, or taken too seriously, over an extended time period. The masque in act four is a case in point, since its greatly stylized theatrical celebration of the dynastic union between Ferdinand (of Naples) and Miranda (of Milan), with its promise of harmony and fertility, can only briefly mask the continuing discord between Prospero and Antonio and the unresolved conflict between Prospero and Caliban. The masque was an aristocratic genre of theatrical performance in the early 17th century, in which members of the court or of a noble household took part as actors; it is a very special historical form of drama whose original performance context and function has completely vanished (Lindley 1984; Butler 2008). Combining prestigious literary forms such as the Petrarchan sonnet with references to classical antiquity, the masque genre came

into its own at the early Stuart court of James I and Anne of Denmark (see Bevington and Holbrook 1998). Its inclusion in *The Tempest* (c. 1611) is thus no accident but a reflection of a contemporary theatrical taste for the "poetics of spectacle" (Orgel 1971) that the masque provided. Independent of its actual performance location (the court, the Blackfriars, or the Globe), Shakespeare's historical audience would easily have understood the masque and its representational and ritual functions in the play. This is clearly no longer the case; neither meaning nor function of the masque are easily accessible to modern audiences.

In *The Tempest,* the masque is performed by Prospero's spirits; its ritual function is to celebrate the union between Miranda and Ferdinand. The spirits appear in the guise of the Roman goddesses Iris, Ceres, and Juno, "A contract of true love to celebrate, / And some donation freely to estate / On the blessed lovers" (4.1.84-86, 2011: 271). Ceres and Juno are benign female powers of motherhood (otherwise notably absent from the play), agricultural civilization, fertility, and harmonious order. Ceres (the Roman version of Demeter) blesses the lovers with a cornucopia: "Earth's increase, foison plenty, / Barns and garners never empty" (4.1.110-111, 2011: 273). In the short time span covered by the masque, the agricultural year concludes with harvest. Ceres wishes for the immediate return of "Spring" without winter (4.1.114-115). Ferdinand praises the performance as "a most majestic vision, and / Harmonious charmingly" (4.1.118-119), perfectly summing up the aesthetic and political ideals of the "poetics of spectacle."

As a play within the play, the masque can be read (and staged) either as an emblematic emphasis of the entire play's ritual character or as a contrast to the 'realism' of the island world in *The Tempest.* The latter reading is supported by the – dramatically interesting – fact that it is not brought to completion but interrupted by Prospero, who suddenly remembers that not every danger has been dealt with: Caliban is still plotting against him. The masque in *The Tempest* presents, in the words of Günter Walch (1996: 234-35), "an astonishing confluence of the conventional masque discourse traditionally associated with power, with the discourses of magic and, also, of alterity," because Caliban's intrusion in Prospero's mind constitutes a "violent inversion of the court theatre convention" (235). According to Walch, it "tells us that the superior prince and magician can control the forces of nature with elegance and his enemies up to a point, but that there is something else, this curious creature Caliban, whom in the end he cannot control" (ibid.). The masque may be a benign vision of bountiful harmony, but it also marks – by exclusion – the uncontrollable realities of Prospero's island world.

For an early modern audience, the interruption of the masque by Prospero would have

been a sure sign of rupture in the performance of the magician's power, because the masque was *the* aristocratic and courtly genre *par excellence,* combining, to use one of Greenblatt's most resonant phrases, the representation of power with the power of representation (see Greenblatt 1982). Its inclusion does not make *The Tempest* as a whole part of the masque genre, but on the contrary may serve as a critique of the masque as a piece of self-satisfying theatrical escapism; for a while, it makes the ruler forget about his real problems, but these return with a vengeance at the end.

This is an example of Shakespeare's theater *medializing* an entire dramatic genre in the dialectic of embedding and disembedding, representation and theatricality that I analyzed above with regard to costume, and that is at the center of the Shakespearean media ecology. The masque was much more than mere theatrical entertainment, but a highly performative form of (inter-)action, replete with aesthetic, social and political meanings, geared toward the feudal self-representation of royalty and aristocracy. With the decline of the court masque and the (re-)popularization of Shakespeare from the late 17th century onward, this level of significance vanished; it became historical in the sense of 'no longer existing'. The masque in *The Tempest* became a stumbling block that was frequently cut from performances of the play, although its features of stage spectacle are often translated to the visual dimensions of the entire play. For example, in Peter Greenaway's adaptation *Prospero's Books* (1991) the masque is arguably the visual and musical culminating point of the film, as is the case in Derek Jarman's earlier film of *The Tempest* (1979). Jarman omits the text of the masque but makes a spirited attempt at translating the masque for modern audiences in the performance of jazz singer Elizabeth Welch dressed like a virgin queen. Julie Taymor's film of *The Tempest* (2010) at one of its weakest moments replaces the masque by a love song based on Feste's "O mistress mine" from *Twelfth Night* (2.3.36-48) and images of constellations in the night sky.

Replacing one cultural code with another may not be the best possible solution to overcome the masque's obsoleteness, even for presentist Shakespeareans. Yet for a modern audience, the masque's significance cannot be recuperated or revived because its original context of meaning has been lost. The masque is reduced, or at best translated, into a set of unstable spectacular show elements that proves even less sustainable in performance. This is not merely a problem of translating from one historical period, or one medium, to another; more importantly, it is not merely a problem of interpreting Shakespeare historically or according to a presentist agenda. It is also a problem that Shakespeare's plays already contain and address in their repeated negotiations between the representational and performative

dimensions of theater. Moreover, it is not a question of more or less faithful adaptations, either, since theatricality and representation are conflicting forces at the core of Shakespeare's historical poetics of drama as much as in modern hermeneutics of revival or recycling in cinema and other new media (cf. Cartelli/Rowe 2007, Rowe 2010). There is no return to the original performance; no amount of learned commentary can lead us back to the "actual experience" of watching the masque in *The Tempest* in 1611 or 1613, when the play was performed as one of fourteen court performances to celebrate the marriage of James I's daughter Elizabeth to the Elector Palatine. The masque forces us to acknowledge Shakespeare's inaccessible alterity. But from a media-based perspective, it also points us to the multimedia spectacle that was Shakespeare, combining poetry with music, elaborate costumes and dance. Even without establishing a simple continuity between past and present, one can find these elements of spectacle in new forms, in very different shapes and disguises, in the media culture of today.

4

I would like to conclude this essay on a presentist note; I am writing this on August 13, 2012, the day after the closing ceremony of the London Olympics, which contained numerous Shakespeare references, beginning with quotations printed as newspaper headlines on the stage floor. Still somewhat overwhelmed by the manifold impressions of this televised spectacle, I cannot help associating the combination of digital high-tech, singing voices, and human bodies dancing across a stage imprinted with the words "To be or not to be" with the promise and problems of *The Tempest* as a piece of theater that has become, over time, a metonymy for theater as such. The ceremony opened with actor Timothy Spall popping out of a miniature Big Ben, dressed in his role of Winston Churchill from *The King's Speech* and reciting Caliban's famous lines from *The Tempest,* "The isle is full of noises, / Sounds, and sweet airs [...]" (3.2.135-143, 2011: 254). *The Tempest* had already played a similar role in the opening ceremony, so this constituted a reprise of a theme connecting both events, and thus framing the Games. The densely interlaced cross-references in this performance, like much of what followed, would merit closer scrutiny in its near-parodic patchwork of patriotic gestures relieved by comic touches of pretended inadequacy (by the appearance on stage of the comedian Eric Idle and the mayor of London, Boris Johnson). Probably the multiple ironies of the parallel between Churchill and Caliban were meant to be less noticeable than the association of the island's "noises" with rush hour traffic and the noise of construction work.

Later *Tempest* elements in the closing ceremony of the London Olympics included a Trinculo (Russell Brand, who played this role in the 2010 film), an Ariel in the shape of singer-songwriter Jessie J, and a semi-shipwrecked ship carrying Annie Lennox. In such a fluid and mobile media environment of fast-paced changes, viewers probably did not have time to worry about the fact that "the isle" that Caliban describes in *The Tempest* 3.2 is not (one of) the British Isles. But my point is a different one. Whether producers and audience realized it or not, opening and closing the Games with elements from *The Tempest* effectively reconnected theater with elements of spectacle that historically precede Western verbal drama, such as ancient Greek theater/opera and, of course, sports (cf. Pfeiffer 2002 for an analysis of the cultural and media dimensions of sports from ancient to modern times). I do not intend to read the closing ceremony of London 2012 as a performance or adaptation of *The Tempest*, but on its own terms, as an open-ended operatic multi-media spectacular, an attempt at re-opening performative potentialities; not as a return to any specific historical Shakespeare, but as an inspired piece of recycling that re-connected the Wembley Arena with the amphitheaters of the classical world via the Globe Theater in the form of popular entertainment.

Both *The Tempest* and its numerous reworkings or reshufflings, from the operas of the 17th and 18th century to the closing ceremony of the London Olympics in 2012, offer a paradigmatic illustration of the attractiveness and major problems associated with Shakespeare's dramatic art: the potential for engrossing the audience in performative effects on the one hand, and the limits of theatrical realism on the other. Neither representation nor theatricality is able to keep the audience – literally – on their feet for an extended period of time. Yet the media conditions of Shakespeare's age allowed his plays to mediate – to a large extent successfully – between the Scylla of representation and the Charybdis of performance (cf. Weimann and Bruster 2008). Our modern image of Shakespeare in performance is liable to become distorted both by our reading the texts too much as 'literature' and by our watching the plays in those types of theaters that turn them into cultural or – worse – educational institutions. Audiences and students need to be reminded that theater in Shakespeare's time was not a serious institution of civic, urban high culture but a highly volatile and risky entertainment industry in competition with other forms of relaxation from blood sports to bearbaiting (see Höfele 2011). Shakespeare studies today, I argue, need to pay more attention to the media context(s) of Shakespeare's own time as well as to those of the present.

The purpose of this essay has been to introduce a media-ecological perspective on Shakespeare as a new departure for early modern studies beyond New Historicism and

Presentism. I have tried to connect the historical singularity and the multiple, manifold reworkings of Shakespeare's theater. Neither a purely historicist nor a radically presentist perspective can do justice to this dual focus. Using the toolbox provided by media ecology, which offers a theoretical and methodological approach to "ontological intermediality" (Schröter 2011), which has so far found little application in Shakespeare studies, I have argued that the respective limitations of these approaches can be overcome: by exploring the historical media conditions of Shakespeare's time, while also paying attention to changing historical contexts of reception and reinvention, and thereby connecting ever-new performance situations in completely different spatial and cultural environments – from opera stages to globally televised media events – and their origins in a genealogy of media effects.

Such a reconception can focus on those dimensions in Shakespeare's plays that are not directly accessible through the words on the page: non-textual elements that are usually not in the focus of textually oriented historicists, but which nevertheless fulfill important functions in performance and can be realized differently in different media. Neither a purely historicist nor a purely presentist scholarly discourse can do justice to Shakespeare as a media potential that has been and still is actualized and renewed in ever-changing ways in different historical periods, locations, and media settings, from the Jacobean court to Wembley Stadium.

It is a prevalent claim that Shakespeare's plays could only come into being under the social, cultural and historical conditions that prevailed in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. But they cannot be exhausted by their original conditions of performance. The plays have been and are still being treated as material that can be exploited for many different interests and purposes. Since the nineteenth century, they have also been read, studied and interpreted as sacred, inviolable texts, something they certainly were not at the time of their first performances. In other words, Shakespeare constitutes one of the best instances of the unstable media status of theater (and of literature more generally): it oscillates between ephemeral entertainment and sustained efforts of reading and interpretation. In realizing the significance of this oscillation between transitory attraction and lasting appeal, or between pleasure and hard work, there is a genuine opportunity of moving away from the fruitless debate between historicists and presentists. In this context, the masque in *The Tempest* appears as a metonymy for Shakespeare's theater and for the challenge that this theater will always pose to new audiences and readers. If media ecology holds any promise for further research in this area, it lies in making possible connections between the original corpus and the historical reshuffling of Shakespeare without either eliding the difference between past and present or ignoring their continuities.

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